



The Press—Neither Friend nor Enemy

DURING MY YEAR in the presidency I have had many an opportunity to learn at first hand something of the way news of medicine and of the profession reaches the public through the press. This experience has given me a view of the diversity and scope of this medium of expression not usually seen by a reader of one or two dailies. I would like to share this view with you.

The medical profession, when publicly defending a way of medical practice it believes is better for everyone, is propounding a point of view, not pronouncing a scientific fact. This invites argument and criticism from all who differ, because each is his own authority on a matter of opinion. Unless medicine can swing freely in public debate and accept the bruises of retaliation, it had best confine its forensics to the classroom.

This is particularly true for those of us who, by designation or by office, serve as spokesmen for the profession at various organizational levels. The give-and-take of the open forum can be a harrowing experience until you become hardened to the blows of rebuttal. Even then, it is not comfortable.

Medicine's position on the economics of medical care is not easily accepted by those who prefer to believe promises that imply they will be freed from basic self-responsibility. To this extent, we are championing an unpopular cause. But we must continue, despite the battering that sometimes distorts the reflection of our public image in newspaper reports of what has been said or done.

This occasional distortion is a source of concern to all of us, and many of us vent our displeasure by blaming the newspapers, by accusing them of prejudice. Let me assure you from first-hand experience with the press that it is not out to harm us or to help us, to be our "enemy" or our "friend." It is there to *report* the news, not *make* it. We and our adversaries are the ones who make it. When the news that is reported about medicine is harsh or uncomplimentary, don't blame the press. To do so is as pointless as killing the courier who brings bad tidings.

Sometimes the profession looks good in print. Sometimes it doesn't. But whatever the appearance, it is the result of something that someone said or did, on either side of the argument.

The responsible press of this state—and it is by far in the majority—is represented by responsible reporters. They are capable and conscientious. They are seldom misled by evasion or double talk and quickly learn whom they can depend on for a straight answer.

Reporters are trained to look behind the prepared statement for the "why" of the story. And if there is another side, they need to know what it is. It is simply enlightened self-interest to cooperate with them to the fullest. The results may not always be flattering to us or our cause—but that isn't necessarily the reporter's doing; it usually is the nature of the news itself.

There are instances, of course, when medicine's image, as reflected in a newspaper article, appears to have been deliberately disfigured by the writer. This is most likely to seem to be the case when the reporter's name is signed to the story, a practice that permits a freedom of expression not possible in an unsigned article.

When this occurs it is a good idea to give the article a second reading—and then a third. It might develop that what at first appears to be reportorial bias resolves into a straightforward recital by the reporter of some unpleasant statements that were made by someone else. This could be confirmed by comparison with another newspaper's account of the same story.

If, however, the verbal embellishments of the facts show prejudice, one is certainly justified in going to the source by arranging a meeting with the writer for an airing of differences of opinion. It is surprising how far a reasonable discussion can go toward achieving a mutual respect—even if neither accepts the other's point of view.

It is at times like this—and whenever medicine speaks on public issues—that the aloofness of the profession's top hat and the authority of its frock coat must be hung on the rack with the buggy whip. Shirt-sleeve sincerity is the strongest armor we have.

We must continue to speak out, even knowing that our position may not now be unchallenged. And we must continue to speak plainly and clearly, hoping that our words will be adequately reported, fully understood and, eventually, widely accepted.

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